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# THE SENSE OF DEITY AND BEGGING THE QUESTION WITH ONTOLOGICAL AND COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

Daniel M. Johnson

Calvin famously interprets Romans 1 as ascribing human knowledge of God in nature not to inferences from created things (natural theology) but to a “sense of deity” that all people share and sinfully suppress. I want to suggest that the sense of deity interpretation actually provides the resources for explaining the persuasive power and usefulness of natural theology. Specifically, I will argue that understanding certain ontological and cosmological arguments as dependent on the sense of deity preserves their ability to persuade while helping solve serious problems with the justification of their premises. In the case of the ontological argument, this will provide a new response to the most serious objection that the argument faces, the charge that it begs the question.

Calvin famously interprets Romans 1 as ascribing human knowledge of God in nature not to inferences from created things (natural theology) but to a “sense of deity” that all people share and sinfully suppress:

That there exists in the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man, being aware that there is a God, and that he is their Maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service.<sup>1</sup>

This interpretation, naturally, gives theistic arguments a different role to play in the theological enterprise than does the natural theology interpretation, leading some Reformed theologians to dismiss natural theology altogether. I want to suggest that the sense of deity interpretation actually provides the resources for explaining the persuasive power and usefulness of natural theology. Specifically, I will argue that understanding certain ontological and cosmological arguments as dependent on the sense of deity preserves their ability to persuade while helping solve serious problems with the justification of their premises. In the case of the ontological

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<sup>1</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 43.



argument, this will provide a new response to the most serious objection that the argument faces, the charge that it begs the question.

What is involved in the sense of deity? First, it generates non-inferential knowledge of God. Second, this knowledge is not a bare knowledge that God exists, but involves knowledge of his “eternal power and divine nature” (Romans 1:20). Third, since the sense of deity is the basis on which pagans, on Calvin’s reading of Romans, can be held responsible for rejecting God, it involves actual knowledge which can be suppressed, not merely the potential for knowledge. (“Suppression” here can be cashed out in a number of ways, including self-deception or the straightforward removal of the belief.) Fourth, it is not simply a belief-generator, but a structural disposition to *worship*, which when suppressed is not effaced but turned toward idolatrous worship of created things. Fifth, the sense of deity is somehow *mediated* through created things, though that mediation is not *inferential*.<sup>2</sup> (The precise sense in which the SD is mediated, like the sense in which it is suppressed, is vague enough to be amenable to various accounts.)

Not all of these elements are equally important for the purposes of natural theology; the first three are the most essential, and the fourth is important just because it highlights the fact that the sense of deity never really stops pressing in on people even when suppressed.<sup>3</sup> I am not trying to argue for these claims, but simply that if they are assumed, they provide a powerful account of the usefulness of natural theology.

### *The Ontological Argument*

The ontological argument I will concern myself with is Plantinga’s version of the modal argument:

- (1) Possibly, a maximally great being exists.
- (2) (Hence) a maximally great being exists (from 1, by S5).<sup>4</sup>

The conclusion follows from the premise, given the S5 modal axiom and a suitable definition of the property of “maximal greatness” involving necessary existence.<sup>5</sup> There has been some debate over whether S5 is the correct system of modal logic, but by far the most significant objection to the argument has been the charge that it begs the question and is therefore useless. Consider the following modal *disproof* of God’s existence:

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<sup>2</sup>God’s invisible qualities are “understood from what has been made” (Romans 1:20).

<sup>3</sup>The ambiguity of the fifth point would become important in further development of an epistemological theory of the sense of deity, because it allows for internalist interpretations as well as Plantinga’s externalist interpretation.

<sup>4</sup>Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), chap. 10.

<sup>5</sup>The S5 modal axiom states that if anything is possibly necessary, then it is necessary. Any definition of maximal greatness that includes necessary existence is sufficient to run the argument (though necessary existence is usually accompanied by other Anselmian great-making properties). By S5, if a necessary being is possible, then it is necessary—and hence actual.

(1') Possibly, a maximally great being fails to exist.

(2') (Hence) there is no maximally great being (from 1, by S5).

There are also other parody arguments proving a whole host of necessary beings, not-quite-maximally great beings, and even devils.<sup>6</sup> As it turns out, the possibility premises of some of these parody arguments are incompatible with the possibility premise of the ontological argument, but it is hard to see why the possibility premise of the ontological argument should be favored over the others, without an antecedent commitment to the truth of the conclusion. There have been a number of attempts to respond to this objection either by adducing specific (often *a posteriori*) arguments for the truth of the controversial premise or by adducing general criteria which establish the truth or a presumption of the truth of the premise.<sup>7</sup> A different sort of response, Plantinga's response, is to argue that even in the absence of independent support for the premise, the argument can still show that theistic belief is rational even though the argument is dialectically ineffective.<sup>8</sup>

The sense of deity can be employed to formulate an entirely different sort of solution to the problem. (This solution may at first appear blatantly question-begging, but this appearance will be cleared up shortly.) Whatever else one thinks about modal epistemology, one surefire way for coming to know possibility is by inferring it from actuality. My hypothesis is that I know that God possibly exists *because I know that God actually exists* (from the sense of deity), and possibility follows from actuality. Therefore, I know the premise by virtue of the sense of deity, and my justification for believing it depends on my prior justification for believing that God exists. This gives an account of my knowledge of the possibility premise

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<sup>6</sup>See, for example, William Rowe, "The Ontological Argument and Question Begging," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7:4 (1976a); Rowe, "Comments on Professor Davis' 'Does the Ontological Argument Beg the Question?'" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7:4 (1976b), pp. 443–447; and Michael Tooley, "Plantinga's Defense of the Ontological Argument," *Mind* 90 (1981), pp. 422–427, among others.

<sup>7</sup>For examples of specific arguments for the premise utilizing *a posteriori* premises, see especially Alexander Pruss, "Samkara's Principle and Two Ontomystical Arguments," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 49 (2001), pp. 111–120; and Todd Buras and Michael Cantrell, "A Modal Argument From Desire," unpublished manuscript. For discussions of general criteria for judging possibility claims, see (among many others) Clement Dore, "The Possibility of God," *Faith and Philosophy* 1:2 (1984), pp. 303–315; and Michael Tooley, "Plantinga's Defense of the Ontological Argument," *Mind* 90 (1981), pp. 422–427. This discussion, like the parody strategy, is a staple of debate over ontological arguments, stretching back to Leibniz and past him to Scotus. These strategies for supporting the ontological argument are mirrored by similar strategies for supporting the possibility premise for the modal disproof of the existence of a maximally great being. See, for example, David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980); J. N. Findlay, "Can God's Existence be Disproved?" *Mind* 57 (1948), pp. 176–183; Tooley, "Plantinga's Defense"; and Richard Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup>Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity*

without having to come up with an (elusive) independent argument for the premise.

This effectively grants William Rowe his point that there is a certain sort of epistemic circularity in the argument, but I want to argue that it does *not* render the argument useless.<sup>9</sup> Here's why. Our sinful suppression of the sense of deity is most unnatural (because sinful) and dramatically difficult (perhaps impossible) to do with consistency—as is seen from the fact that the structural disposition to worship never entirely goes away but is transformed into idolatry. It is therefore likely that we retain in our doxastic web beliefs that depend on belief in God, but which we have failed to remove from our web because we have failed (as a result of the sense of deity) to *consistently* doubt the existence of God. So the possibility premise may yet be accepted by someone who has only partially succeeded in suppressing his or her sense of deity. This doubter may have suspended judgment about or even disbelieved the existence of God while retaining a belief that God's existence is possible, despite having arrived at the possibility belief originally by virtue of the sense of deity. The ontological argument may reasonably persuade such a person.

I will not try to untangle the knot that is the debate over what exactly the fallacy of "begging the question" amounts to. My own sense is that there are a number of loosely related ways in which an argument can be defective which all get lumped under the label of begging the question, and I'm willing to admit that the ontological argument may have one or more of these defects. (For instance, on my account it probably does beg the question in Rowe's "epistemic" sense—its ability to reasonably persuade depends on antecedent knowledge of the conclusion.)<sup>10</sup> I'm merely arguing that what defects it has do not entail its uselessness, and that if Calvin is right about the sense of deity, the argument may be widely useful. To be sure, the argument's usefulness will depend on the dialectical situation in which it is employed; it will be useful only when directed at those who have suppressed their belief in God but not their belief in God's possibility. The argument, then, does not rise to the level of a "proof," employing premises that all or nearly all people will endorse. This is not that much of a limitation, though, since nearly all philosophical arguments are of this sort.

There are three significant assumptions underlying this account. First, it assumes that at least some of those who doubt the existence of God do so either irrationally or through some non-rational process such as forgetting. This is because the argument is incapable of providing justification for belief in God that exceeds the original justification for that belief provided by the sense of deity, which means that the argument cannot rationally overcome evidence sufficient to defeat the justification provided by the sense of deity. Calvin would say that none of those who doubt God do so justifiably (that there is no evidence sufficient to rationally defeat the justification provided by the sense of deity), but my argument requires me

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<sup>9</sup>Rowe, "Comments on Professor Davis."

<sup>10</sup>Ibid. However, see the discussion of the second assumption made by my account below; on some views of awareness requirements on knowledge, the argument may not even have this defect.

to say only that *some* people doubt without justification and that the argument will be useful only when directed at these people. This is not a severe limitation, though, if the sense of deity provides strong justification.

Second, it assumes that it is rational to continue to believe something after having forgotten or rejected (or suppressed) the original ground for that belief.<sup>11</sup> I do not remember where or when I learned the Pythagorean theorem, nor do I remember explicitly any situations in which I gained extra evidence for the truth of the theorem—but surely I still know that it is true. Many of my beliefs are like this. Consider the following case. I check into room 314 at a motel, and on the basis of this I make a mental note to myself that my room number is the first three digits of *pi*. Later, I forget my room number but remember that it is the first three digits of *pi*, and infer from that that my room number is 314. In this case I still had knowledge that my room number was the first three digits of *pi* even though I had forgotten the original ground for it (that the room number is 314), and I was able to use that knowledge to recover my lost knowledge of the original ground. Those views of knowledge that do not require me to have present awareness of the reasons that my belief is based on (the ground of my belief) will have no problem accounting for this phenomenon. Even those epistemologists who argue that knowledge requires present awareness of the ground of my belief, though, will want to account for these sorts of cases by arguing that I actually do have a present ground for my belief which is different from the original ground, perhaps a sense of confidence in the belief. In this latter case, though, the ontological argument turns out to be totally impeccable, both noncircular and potentially dialectically effective, because my belief in God's possibility might have that same sort of present ground.<sup>12</sup> Regardless of which view of present awareness requirements on knowledge we take, then, the ontological argument turns out to be potentially useful if Calvin is right about the sense of deity—either circular but reasonably persuasive or simply noncircular.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>I owe both of the following examples to Alexander Pruss.

<sup>12</sup>I'm inclined to take this as an argument against such views of knowledge, because I think the arguments of the sort I've been describing are clearly circular, and such views cannot account for that circularity. My argument does not require this conclusion, however. Alternatively, if the suppression of the sense of deity is taken to be a kind of self-deception rather than outright removal of belief, then I don't actually lose belief in God when I suppress it. In this case, I would have a present ground (belief in God) for my belief (in God's possibility) that may satisfy some weak awareness or other internalist requirements, and the argument would serve to remove my self-deception rather than to create a new belief. This interpretation of suppression as self-deception is likely to be controversial, though, and the suppressed beliefs still may not meet stricter awareness requirements on evidence. So I think my claim in the text—that if present awareness requirements on knowledge are true, then the ontological argument is altogether noncircular—will persuade more people who endorse such requirements than this way of allowing for awareness requirements to be satisfied while still making the argument circular.

<sup>13</sup>Recall that if there aren't strong awareness requirements on knowledge, then the argument is circular because my justification to believe the premises depends on antecedent justification to believe the conclusion, but it is still reasonably persuasive, as the hotel case shows.

Third, it assumes that the sense of deity includes an awareness of God either as a necessary being or as maximally great in such a way that enables an inference to necessary existence. If I know that God exists from the sense of deity but I don't know that God is a necessary being or maximally great, then I am not entitled to infer from that a possibility premise sufficient to run a modal ontological argument. I think it very plausible to believe that necessary existence or maximal greatness is included, though, in the awareness of God's "eternal power and divine nature" that is included in the sense of deity.

This way of accounting for the usefulness of the ontological argument is a curious one, considerably different from the strategies in the literature, because I really haven't given the doubter any more reason to accept the argument. Nor have I aided Plantinga's claim that the argument shows theistic belief to be rational, because my account assumes that Calvin is right about the sense of deity and so *assumes* that theistic belief is rational. What I have done is make a higher-level observation about the argument, that it may be useful in certain situations even without independent support. Because this is a meta-argument regarding the conditions in which the argument can be dialectically useful, the success of the ontological argument does not depend on the arguer being able to *show* that those conditions hold (that the sense of deity provides justification, and so on), but only that they do in fact hold. In other words, the arguer doesn't have to prove to his or her target that I am right about the argument; I only have to be *actually* right about the argument. My argument here is aimed, then, less at those who are trying to find out whether they should be persuaded by the ontological argument and more at those who are deciding whether the ontological argument is a legitimately useful argument to employ.

Notice that this does not rule out other strategies of supporting the possibility premise. After all, my beliefs can have a surplus of justification—it could be that I know that God possibly exists because I know (or knew) that he actually exists *and* because I have some independent reason for believing that he possibly exists, such that if I lose one source of justification, I still have the other.

The sense of deity is not the only sort of thing that could enable the ontological argument's usefulness in the sense I've been developing, though I think that it would result in the most widespread usefulness for the argument and, given the success of Reformed epistemology in recent years, is perhaps the most plausible and likely to be true. Really, the ontological argument could be useful for anyone who comes to know that God exists and therefore that he possibly exists and who subsequently abandons (either unjustifiably or due to forgetfulness) the belief that God exists but retains the belief that he possibly exists. A religious experience which is forgotten or turned away from may create such a situation (and, indeed, the sense of deity can be construed as a kind of universal religious experience), or, though it is less likely, a previously accepted (sound) argument that is forgotten or wrongly rejected.

I have purposefully avoided committing myself to any particular model of how the sort of inference I've been describing—the recovery of lost knowledge by inference from knowledge based on that lost knowledge—preserves rationality. I have shown that there are such rationality-

preserving inferences (the hotel case shows this), and this is sufficient to argue that the ontological argument can be such an inference if Calvin is right about the sense of deity. Any model explaining the rationality of such inferences would be more doubtful than the fact that such inferences do exist and are rational, and so it would be counterproductive for me to commit to one.

### *The Cosmological Argument*

The charge of begging the question is less often urged against cosmological arguments employing the principle of sufficient reason (PSR), but it is not unheard of, and it is precisely the PSR that is the target.<sup>14</sup> This charge, along with purported counterexamples to or undesirable consequences from the PSR, has motivated a series of defenses of the PSR and attempts to construct cosmological arguments employing weakened versions of the PSR.<sup>15</sup> Even among those who accept the PSR, there is some difficulty in accounting for how we come to know it, assuming that it is true.<sup>16</sup> The paradigm version of the PSR is the thesis that all contingent facts have an explanation.

It could be that we straightforwardly infer the PSR from our knowledge of God from the sense of deity. We know not only that God exists but his "eternal power and divine nature." The idea of God as sovereign creator of the world is likely contained in this knowledge of God's divine nature and power, which means that we know that all the contingent truths about the world are explained by God's activity, and so we know that they all require an explanation. This seems like an easy inference, and so it is plausible to suppose that almost everybody makes this inference at some point (especially in light of the fact that the sense of deity presses on us every moment of our existence, and we are constantly struggling to suppress it).

The same observations regarding persuasive circular arguments apply here as in the case of the ontological argument. In fact, it may be that it is harder to suppress the PSR than the belief that God possibly exists, because of the ubiquitous use the PSR has in our everyday reasoning—which would help explain why the cosmological argument is traditionally so much more persuasive than the ontological argument. So, instead of explaining my justification for the PSR in terms of its constitutive role

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<sup>14</sup>See, for example, William Rowe, "The Cosmological Argument," *Nous* 5 (1971), pp. 49–61.

<sup>15</sup>For defenses of the PSR, see Alexander Pruss, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Robert Koons, "Epistemological Foundations for the Cosmological Argument," in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion, Volume I*, ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). For cosmological arguments employing weakened versions of the PSR, see Richard Gale and Alexander Pruss, "A New Cosmological Argument," *Religious Studies* 35 (1999), pp. 461–476; and Alexander Pruss, "A Restricted Principle of Sufficient Reason and the Cosmological Argument," *Religious Studies* 40 (2004), pp. 165–179.

<sup>16</sup>See Robert Koons, "Epistemological Foundations" for an argument that some form of the PSR is known *a priori*.



in everyday reasoning (which runs into problems with pragmatic justifications for beliefs), I can explain my justification for the PSR in terms of the sense of deity and then explain the fact that the PSR is often not suppressed along with belief in God in terms of its constitutive role in everyday reasoning.

Again, I do not think this account is in competition with other attempts to support the PSR or to account for our knowledge of it. As before, it is possible for my beliefs to have a surplus of justification.

I'd like to take a look at one objection to my account.<sup>17</sup> There are theists who don't believe the PSR (e.g., van Inwagen), and theists who don't believe that God is a necessary being in the modal sense (this was a common response to Findlay's modal disproof of the existence of God).<sup>18</sup> How then can I say that the sense of deity allows knowledge of the PSR or the possibility premise of the ontological argument? I have a few things to say in response. First, anybody who thinks the relevant premises in the theistic arguments are false won't think that anybody can come to know them by *any* means, since knowledge entails truth. So my account of the role of the sense of deity in supporting these arguments will convince only those who think the premises are true—but that is all it is supposed to do, since as I said before my argument is a higher-level observation about the theistic arguments, not an independent case for the controversial premises in those arguments. Second, the mere fact that some theists disbelieve these premises doesn't say much about whether they can be reasonably inferred from the sense of deity, because many who believe that God exists may have come to that belief by other means than the sense of deity or may have resisted certain deliverances of or warranted inferences from the sense of deity (either irrationally—sin doesn't disappear in theists—or by virtue of obtaining defeaters for them). The existence of theists who disbelieve the premises of the arguments, therefore, doesn't mean that the premises can't be reasonably inferred from the sense of deity.

I conclude, then, that it is possible for the ontological and cosmological arguments to be dialectically effective even absent any independent support for their respective controversial premises—and that they probably will often have this effectiveness if Calvin is right about the sense of deity. Therefore, the sense of deity provides a different kind of response to the charge of begging the question leveled against the two arguments.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Due in part to an anonymous referee for this journal.

<sup>18</sup>Findlay, "Can God's Existence be Disproved?"

<sup>19</sup>Much thanks especially to Alexander Pruss, for a lot of discussion and encouragement. Thanks also to two anonymous referees and the editor of this journal for helpful feedback.